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Ron Carlson

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RON CARLSON

Victory at Sea

Stan Craig's trailer was the source of a lot of talk in Fort Lunch; it was the first personally owned trailer that had dual wheels on double axles. He bought it one Saturday on Tradio, the morning swap-talk show on KNUP, the radio station in town. The fiberglass boat factory in Permission was closing its doors and they'd made one more trailer than they needed, a mathematical problem that went back thirty years when they started selling sportcraft boats each with a trailer, and they'd been one off without knowing it until now.

Stan Craig was going to pick up his partner Alvin Fontenelle and use the Saturday to repair three of their billboards on Route 14, but when Alvin got in Stan's Dodge, they heard the radio advertisement for a once-in-a-lifetime deal on a beautiful new dual-axle boat trailer. They looked at each other and Alvin said, "Let's go see." They drove the forty miles through Troubadour Canyon to Permission, passing four of their best billboards, all standing straight and touting the wonders of the big Galaxy Truckstop, a hundred-acre center that had just about undermined the village of Permission once and for all. The old boat plant was closed up tight, and the ruined gravel parking was empty except for the big white frame trailer. Stan Craig bought the thing in five minutes and hauled it out.

Stan Craig was a bargain hunter from a family of them, and his mother was admired for it, the way she could shop for odd lots of clothes or garden supplies, and she could tell a story about getting a sweater on sale that could hold a mixed audience quiet for forty minutes. Five hundred dollars was a lot of money, but as Alvin, who was a good friend to Stan, said, "The tires alone are worth that. He gave you a deal because you did him a favor. He had one odd trailer, and now, sir, you need a boat."

That became Stan's line: the tires alone are worth the money. He drove the trailer around town for three or four days until one morning when he got pinned in the post office parking lot and had to unhitch so he could get it turned around. Everyone admired the two axles, four tires on each, and the remark was that Stan Craig was

going to get a big boat. The Postmistress Nancy Randooley, Stan's friend and old classmate, heard broad speculation about Stan's boat plans all day long.

All Stan would say was, "When the time is right." He didn't want to get pushed into buying a big boat right away. He could afford it, but not unless it was also going to be a bargain.

When he and Alvin would go out to Fort Lunch Reservoir, they'd fish from shore as they had done since their school days, and they would talk about the boats that would go by near and far.

"Yours is going to be certainly bigger than that one," Alvin would say, and Stan would say, "Yeah maybe."

They became students of boats, and Alvin printed some stuff from the Internet. But the prices were crushing. A boat that would fit on Stan's trailer was going to be ten thousand dollars if not twenty. Eighty! A double-axle dual-tire trailer required a significant boat.

Stan and Alvin owned the last billboard company in the midlands, and their territory had the last ninety-nine full-size non-electric billboards in the country. These were ancient structures that advertised all sorts of things: radio stations and churches and motels, of course, and feed, and the three or four odd tourist sights here and there. The law didn't allow any new signs, and as these antiques fell down they couldn't be rebuilt.

Stan lived alone and he got by. He was known as a man who took things as is. He drove a big black Dodge, because that was the best used vehicle he could find. He'd had it years. It had a hitch, because the previous owner had put it on. It only had AM/FM radio, because that was there. Stan Craig wouldn't dream of driving south to Annex to have a CD player or whathaveyou installed. He kept a clean house, but didn't remodel.

The floral wallpaper from two families back was still up. If something needed fixing, he was your man. But if it wasn't broken, Stan Craig didn't fix it. He was at his mother's every week with one of her projects, shelves in her garage, or new shingles on the entry porch.

He was a modest man with a big boat trailer that he was proud of, but not too proud. Because he had the trailer and because he was the kind of man he was, people knew there was a boat coming, one way or the other.

"I don't know," he'd tell his friends and townspeople when he met them in the post office or the grocery store. "Maybe I'll just resell it. The tires are worth more than I paid."

"No," they said back. "Stan's boat is on the way."

His old classmate and friend Nancy Randooley was the Postmistress of Fort Lunch, and she fielded a lot of questions about Stanley Craig's plans. Because they had lunch every Thursday, the townsfolk imagined them together, though all they had talked about for years on end was business and chores and the like. He did handiwork for her from time to time or hauled something, but always for pay or a meal. Stan had never married and was settled in that. It wasn't something he was going to go out and make happen. Nothing was broke about his living alone, tidily and on the square. Nancy Randooley was forty-two years old, and her youngest daughter who was nineteen had married that month a young rancher from Fee Lake.

"I saw your invisible boat, Stanley," Nancy said when he took his turn to the post office counter.

Stanley Craig was just getting his mail, and he stood there with the sheaf of it in a rubber band, hoping there wasn't any bad news from the highway department or any of the three dozen farmers in whose fields his signs were lodged, and he didn't know what to say to Nancy standing there in her fresh blue shirt. He thought to remark on what a deal he had made on the trailer, but she cut him off by saying something everybody in the post office lobby heard for clear.

"If you get that boat, I'd like to find some Saturday and ride on it. I haven't been aboard a boat big or small since my dad sold that terrible thing we had when I was in school."

"Do you fish or water-ski?" Stanley asked.

"Stanley, you know I fish. But my specialty is a boxed chicken lunch regardless. And Stan, call me ahead of time so I can get to Oxenfree and find a new bathing suit."

He stood and looked at her a beat and then said quietly, "Sure thing," and in the silence that ensued, fourteen post office boxes closed from where they'd been hung open while the citizens listened.

Alvin Fontanelle heard of this exchange, of course, and only had one response. "We'll get you a boat for this once-in-a-lifetime trailer, Stanley, and then you can go eating chicken with a woman in a new bathing suit and commit the other features of nautical courtship with the Postmistress, and one thing will lead to whatever other there is after all these years, but you must promise me that our business will not slide downhill like some neglected thing and sink in ruin."

"Oh Alvin," Stanley Craig said. They were out at Stanley's place and Alvin had come by the night before his two-day swing through the lowlands to check their signs. The noble trailer stood apart glowing in the twilight. Stanley was loading the heavy cardboard tubes full of rolled broadsides that in the morning he would wall-paper onto the four walls they leased in the village itself. Two were from the brewery up in St. Tooth that made a heavy ale called Mill Dew and two were public service posters from the Fish and Game about stopping poaching. Stanley came over to Alvin's truck window. "Look yonder at that five-hundred-dollar trailer. I don't see no boat, no marriage, no great tragic shifting of priorities. Fix the signs down south, and we'll go fishing this weekend."

But it was Alvin found the boat. He'd swung west from the wetlands to their huge elevated sign at the edge of Quarrel, an ugly graphic of a national credit phone number, and that sign was high and dry, and then down at the other end of town he'd had to brace the two Texaco signs by the river, both so old they were new again. These were the kind of signs where people stopped and had their pictures taken. Two smiling Texaco attendants in white shirts holding up an oil can and a bright red rag: You Can Trust Your Car to the Man Who Wears the Star. Horses had eaten at the cedar trusses around the bottom of each, and Alvin pulled the splintered timber free and bolted on a set of angle iron splints. They could lick these, but they were not going to chew through.

There, after dark in the Quarrel Café, Alvin saw the little display ad in the free shopper in the region, a weekly called *Dude Ads*, full of crossbows and all-terrain vehicles and boats and the like, toys for men.

The boat was on the water at Stalebay Reservoir above the town of Permission, and the little grainy black-and-white photograph showed it to be a bright long beauty with intact canvas canopies and a folding windshield. It also came with a Vainglory Fish Finder and a 250-horsepower Bustoleum outboard motor.

"With that, we can water-ski clear to the dam at Leafclog," Alvin said.

"You can," Stan said. "I'm not getting out in that lake at the end of the rope with you at the helm pushing it fifty miles an hour. It would tear my arms off." He looked at his friend. "Am I going to have to buy water-skis?"

"We'll get them used," Alvin said. "Is it called the helm?"

They were driving along the Crayon Mesa on a clear June day to retrieve a boat that Stan could afford. All their signs on both sides of the highway, nine of them, were straight and tall and worthy of admiration.

They weren't the kind of men to gloat or soak in self satisfaction, but they did both feel that they had it made, at least today, and Alvin said so: "We got it made, Stan. This is the life." And Stanley agreed. He had always loved the long clear highway up along the fifty miles of Crayon Mesa, the highway running along the railroad tracks all the way to the summit, and a train every hour or two, hauling a hundred boxcars to other places under a sky that was big enough for two trains or three.

"What you going to name the boat?" Alvin said.

"Oh that's right, I've got to name it. What do people name their boats?"

"You know, like something funny. Remember Merton Hardy had that houseboat called *Party Hardy*."

"Yeah, and I always thought it was stupid."

"You want something short so it don't cost much to paint on."

"Like *Stan*."

"No, you're Stan. You'd name it *Stan's Big Boat*."

"It already is Stan's big boat. Make sense."

"You want to paint an advertisement on the back, like *Burma-Shave*?"

"Alvin. Try to help me here."

"What about *The Nancy*?"

When Alvin said that, Stanley, who had been thinking about Nancy and her picnic on the boat, colored up.

"Or not," Alvin said quickly.

"What about *Stan's Big Boat That He Used to Get Nancy Randooley?*"

"That's not what I meant, Stan."

"Yes it is."

"So, is she coming on board the vessel?"

"These things will be decided in time."

They topped the sage plain of Crayon Mesa and drove through the winding red rock bluffs, monuments to the ages, and they turned there onto the shortcut of the River Ford road, twenty miles of bladed gravel that led to the crossing at Camp Blister, the old military station that was now abandoned mostly. At Blister there was a ford across the Lassitude River which had been in place since Stan had fished up at Stalebay as a kid with his dad. The Lassitude grew broad in the flat valley, maybe forty yards here at Blister, and the ford had always been passable. The crossing saved three hours.

They could see a great fan of vehicles lodged at the river's edge today and clusters of men stood on the big rocks where the river turned. It was like this on Saturdays, with a gaggle of characters done up as mountain men for a Rendezvous where they swapped leather goods and shot the muzzleloaders. There was a huge white teepee set up in the ruins of the old fort. When Alvin and Stanley pulled off in the logjam of cars and trucks and stepped from Stan's truck, Cookie Haymule and his brother waved from the river bank. "Don't look now," Cookie said to Stan when they came up, "but you lost your boat."

"That's funny."

"Or it's invisible," his brother Les said.

"We've heard it before," Alvin said.

"There's a lot of tires on that empty trailer," Les went on. "It's a beauty."

"What have we here?" Stan said to Les. "What's the holdup?"

Les just pointed into the luminous swollen water, and something yellow glimmered up, as if a sheet were waving.

"What is that?"

"That is one of the county's finest equipment trucks parked on the rocky bottom of the Lassitude River."

"My god," Stan said. "That's Elias Horn's truck. Is he in there?"

"He's yonder," Les said, pointed to the back of a truck camper amid the parking. "They've dried him off now and he's okay."

"We lost the road," Cookie said. "A log or somesuch knocked the teeth out of the ford and it's channeled out now. Happened last night." They all watched two men in waders poling out along the old crossing. They stopped thirty feet from shore and the pole disappeared.

"Right here," one called. "It's all washed out."

Stan could see the current swollen there and rushing. It would be months before they repaired the breach and rebuilt the rock ford.

"He landed right side up," Stan said, looking again at the submerged truck.

"Elias said the front wheels dropped away and then he just got lifted downstream and dropped into that hole."

"He's twenty feet deep," Alvin said. They all looked at the yellow roof of the truck, waving.

"Thirty," Cookie said. "That water magnifies everything."

"Well," Stan said to Alvin. "We tried. No boat today."

They were backing the trailer around when a big bearded man in an ornate fringed leather jacket stepped up and put his hand on Stan's doorsill. "This your trailer?"

"Yes it is," Stan said. "You can see it is."

"I got a project for you and your empty trailer," the man said. "Could you pull up there to the outpost gates by the teepee?"

"We got a minute," Stan said to Alvin. "Let's see what Daniel Boone is up to."

It was a bear trap.

The man introduced himself as Reynolds Snowstorm, and he was all in leather, even beaded moccasins, and he wore a significant necklace of elk teeth, and his bracelets were clustered with turquoise.

"Is that your real name?" Alvin said, coming around the back of the trailer.

"As real as any," the big man said. "It's a name I gave myself a few years ago. These people know it now." There was a white banner in the trees with red lettering that said Trading Post. They walked along a short line of tables covered with beadwork and wares fashioned from horns and shells and teeth and claws. They

walked beyond the gathering to the edge of the aspens, and here the last burned columns of the old fort were blackened stumps in the ground, and they approached a huge rusted cylinder which could have been the steam barrel for an old locomotive.

"By government auction last month, I became the proud owner of this bear trap right here, gentlemen, and I'll pay you two hundred dollars to haul it back down Griff's Crossing where I'm going to install it in front of the frontier museum there."

"The old pool hall?" Alvin said. "He's got a number of mounted trophies inside, but I didn't know it was a museum."

"Will be," Snowstorm said. "We're putting it together."

Stan and Alvin beheld the ancient bear trap. It was a heavy gauge barrel with a steel bar cage, rusted forevermore and dangerous looking. The bars were welded in a grid at a primordial forge that Stan couldn't imagine. How they ever got the thing out here was a deep mystery.

"How much does it weigh?"

"Not that much," the big mountain man said. "You've got dual axles. We can center this for you and it should ride just right. Easier than a boat. Where is your boat?"

"Across yon river," Alvin said. "We're getting it next week."

"Or the week after that," Stan said.

"Two hundred dollars," Stan said. "That's fifty miles to Griff's Crossing." Alvin raised his eyebrows at Stanley in the universal sign of a good deal.

"Who's going to load and unload?"

"My guys," Snowstorm said. He put out his huge paw and his many bracelets jangled as he shook Stanley's hand.

It took two hours to load the thing. They used levers, stumps, and pulleys. It was buried some in the soft dirt and they had to dig it out, five men, and then getting it centered on the trailer took a long back and forth. When they finally got it to sit, Stan noted the trailer's compressed springs. Reynolds Snowstorm had a rope, and Stan had three comealongs with chains, and they secured the device on the frame trailer so it wouldn't budge. It looked like some tention thing exhumed from the great archeology of punishment, like something that should not be seen in public, like a shame.

Reynolds Snowstorm came over and gave Stan five twenties and then just went ahead and gave him five more, full payment. "I don't expect you're going anywhere with my treasure. Have a good trip, and I'll meet you down there in a couple hours."

Alvin was excited to have made this deal and said so. "Bless us all," he said. "We're getting some good out of this beautiful trailer now, boat or no boat. Hell, when our signs blow down or the horses eat them all, we'll go into the hauling business." Stan looked at his friend. It was a sunny afternoon at the edge of the wilderness, and he felt optimistic too, but he also could feel the trailer moving more seriously behind them, stunned by its load.

"We can haul bear traps all over the country," Stan said. "There's a demand." He was sorry for his remark immediately and said so. Alvin was a good friend. "We could haul carpet and such," Stan added. "There's a lot of ungainly stuff won't go in a pickup."

"That's exactly it."

By the time they got to the summit of Crayon Mesa, Stan could tell there was something different about this drive. The trailer was dragging, and they got out at the pullout and walked around the load. It was secure and looked good, but the huge steel contraption appeared to be crushing the trailer.

"You know," he told Alvin, as they climbed back into the Dodge, "they make those boats out of fiberglass. I don't think they weigh very much."

"Oh yes they do. You've got your engine and all the machinery for steering and your fishing gear and the like. It's a load."

Alvin tried to put the right face on everything, but it wasn't too far down the Crayon Mesa four-lane that Stan knew he had a little more than he could handle. If he let off the gas, he could feel his trailer pushing him, and all the way it wanted to push and drag, push and drag. He was back-heavy, and he had to grip the steering wheel hard to keep the entire program in his lane.

"You could have gone with *Stan's Plans*," Alvin said.

Stanley looked at his friend.

"For the name of the boat."

"Oh, I got that figured," Stan said. He was trying to even out the accelerator, touch and go, and keep it at about fifty miles per hour.

"So, what?" Alvin said. "What's the name?"

"It'd already have a name, wouldn't it?"

"Yes it would." Saying that, Alvin knew. "You'd keep the same name?"

"No need to change it," Stan said.

"What if it is the *Dippety-Do*."

"Works for me."

"*The Sexy Lady*."

"Wonderful. Just fine. Look Alvin, I know you want to rename the boat, but there's just no need."

Alvin sat silently as they drove down the old highway, pushed by their cargo. Finally he said, "If the boat was called something you could fix by changing one letter, would you do that?"

"Not really," Stan said. "But if you want to, we could. Such as?"

"I don't know. I'm just thinking it's going to be your boat on your beautiful trailer and you should name it yourself."

"Alvin," Stanley said. "If the guy still has it next weekend or whenever we can get up to Stalebay, and if the boat is called *Jesus on the Cross*, we'll repaint the name to read *Victory at Sea*. How's that?"

"It should have a real name," Alvin said. "You're not good with transitions."

This is when Stan Craig saw the future in his rear view mirror: smoke.

Then there was smoke up the Crayon Basin, and by the time Alvin said *what* and turned, Stan could see there was a problem with the ditch-side tires. The trailer did not want to slow down, and they suffered several jolts, two or three rattling the men good and torquing the steering wheel from Stan's hands. He braked but it did little, and he saw that this load would stop in its own time.

"Is the fire extinguisher in your truck?"

"It is," Alvin said.

"Can you see flames?"

"No, but it's plenty hot."

At twenty, Stan led the truck and trailer off the road and he and Alvin scrambled out to see the trouble. The flames bloomed from the inside dual tires, heaving knots of greasy black smoke into the great valley.

"It's going to burn up," Stan said. "But it won't hurt his steel bear trap. Unhitch the trailer so I don't lose the truck too."

The two men worked the hitch and unclasped the safety chain, and as they did there was a muted concussion and one of the tires blew in the fire and then another, and then there was a gruesome scream as those tires in the sage ditch sat down and pivoted the wild boat trailer around like a scythe, which Stanley ducked. The two men ran to the road edge and watched the whole thing back down the slope, loping, the good tires riding high and the heavy load asking for speed. It galloped through the barrow ditch and up the siding slope and bounced once onto the railroad tracks and then rested with a snap and scream of broken steel. The four tires burned now like pure oil in the windless day, and the black column of smoke stood like the single thing holding up the sky in Crayon Mesa.

"Did it hit you?" Alvin asked Stanley.

"No, but it had a mind of its own."

"Still does."

"We must have had a flat on one of those inside tires," Alvin said.

"We had a two-ton bear trap," Stan said.

"Let's pull it off the railroad so we don't burn up any ties." Alvin ran a chain down to the hitch socket and hooked it to the truck frame and Stan dragged the burning contraption like a sled back into the bottom of the drainage ditch. Alvin unsnagged the chain and dragged it up. A few small sage bushes caught fire, but there would be no range fire on the barren slope. Alvin and Stanley could see their billboards dotted every mile along the old highway. They saw a freight train top the rise and head toward them. It called three times, so they knew he could see the smoke. Every citizen in the county could see the smoke.

"Is he slowing?"

"Yeah, he's earning his pay."

"Remember when we were in school and would go out to the bluffs and watch the trains?"

"We were going to work the railroad."

"We never stopped a train before."

"No one did, except Griff Jensen with his asphalt truck."

"He was lucky to get out that time."

"Elias Horn was lucky to get out of that river this morning."

"What's worse?" Alvin said. "Driving off the ford into the river or burning up a beautiful trailer?"

"Both," Stanley said. "You know for a fact that they'll be calling the ford Elias's Ford from now until eternity, and this big burned black spot before us is going to be Stan's Big Boat Fire. I'm unhappy about making such history."

They both thought about the places they knew all through the country. Besides Griff's Crossing, there was Acorn's Fourway, where Jack Acorn had turned over his combine all alone and drunk one October, and the bridge in Fort Lunch was called Thunderbird Bridge because of what a tourist did there with such a car in 1957 or '58.

"It's sort of interesting that there isn't any place I know of called Lover's Leap."

This caused Alvin to raise his head thinking, the way a dog will listen for something in the wall. "What about that place in the marsh beyond Quarrel called MaryBill?"

"They were hiking and got lost."

"Did they perish?"

"Oh god, it's a long time ago, one winter. My dad would have known. I hope they didn't. But you can count on the fact that they'll measure how far it is from the bluffs to where Stan's boat burned up. Or how far it is to town. This place will only be black for a year, but they'll remember it."

"I'd say it's about thirty miles," Alvin said looking down the valley. "Thirty-one. It's useful information."

"Don't go on."

"No, it is. Think of how careful folks are down at Griff's Crossing. God, that train hit that truck."

"It did. I can still see it."

Before them now the smoke pulsed into the sky as if from a factory and balled there black and weighty. "We smashed a lot of pennies on the tracks."

"That won't stop a train."

"Evidently. You smashed a lot of quarters."

"I wouldn't do that today," Stan said. "A quarter's a quarter. Except that Montana quarter. I don't care for it."

The two men stood in the beautiful place and watched the trailer burn. From time to time a car passed, slowing. They didn't have a cell phone, but they had a five-hundred-foot pillar of smoke to warn the oncoming train, and finally they saw Clay Bouse drive by in the

post office van, and so that was better than the radio for getting the word out.

A still sunny day is a sunny day anywhere, and here with the distant layered landform vistas of red and gray and blue strata laid in distant millennia and broken an era ago and striped with the railroad a hundred and twenty years before, they leaned against Stan's old Dodge and watched the conflagration as it spread across the axle to the other four tires and renewed itself.

The engineer slowed on the grade and crept his thousand-ton assemblage of railcars up to a quarter mile from where Stan's dual-axle twin-tire boat trailer smoldered now near the tracks. Two vans had come out from town with the volunteer fire company, six guys in one. They all stood watching the fire.

"You burned up your boat a good one," Clay Bouse said.

"It was a beautiful boat," Stan said.

"What did it do, melt?"

Just then Nancy Randooley did a U-turn and pulled up behind the group. She got out with two big shopping bags with handles.

"It's true then," Nancy said. "Our boat has perished in a blaze." She addressed the townsmen. "I'm not feeding the entire fire department."

Two of the guys went down with the big canisters and put out the three small sage that were on fire and then sprayed the burning trailer and tires until they steamed clouds of gray smoke. The trailer had buckled under the steel bear trap and it all sat in the ground as if it had fallen from the sky. Warren Cardeen, the chief, got on his radio and waved at the trainmen, and they all heard the harmonics shift up that way as the train got underway.

"We have had a fire," Stan Craig said to the woman.

"It was a beauty," Alvin said. "That boat."

"Is that chicken in those bags?" Stanley said.

"Among other things," Nancy said. "I took some initiative. I had some ready, because I knew you were on the edge of a decision."

He looked at her. "I am," he said.

"Tell her the name of the boat," Alvin said. He patted Stan Craig on the back. "I'm going to get a ride with Clay and get some work done at the sign shop." He got in Clay Bouse's van, and that car left.

The train was now easing by the place, and Chip Wartaw waved from the cab of the locomotive. He was smiling.

"I like a train," Stanley said.

She studied his face a minute. "You're thinking this is going to be the place where Stan burned up his trailer."

"I am indeed and it will be."

"Stanley, let's make the place where we had our first picnic. That'll give them something to measure from."

A minute later, sitting on the tailgate of his truck, Nancy pointed a chicken leg at the sooty debris in the ditch. "There never was a boat on the trailer."

"Right," he said. "And there was never a bear in that trap."

She put her hand on Stanley's shoulder and then began pulling food from her carrybags. "Some things are meant to be."